

“Do We Know What’s Coming?”

We humans are not too good at reading the signs.

An old Gary Larsen “Far Side” cartoon had a somewhat nerdy-looking boy trying to enter the Midvale School for the Gifted. He’s carrying a book under one arm and leaning with his other arm, with all his weight, against the door, straining, trying to push open the door. On the door there is a sign in great big letters that explains his problem. It reads, “PULL.” That’s us. We’re not too good at reading the signs.

But that was true also of the people Jesus dealt with. Throughout the Gospels, people are coming to Jesus to ask for a sign from heaven. Jesus would perform one sign, or wonder, or healing — many more than John says he can even tell us about [John 21:25]— but then the people would just ask for another sign. Even when Jesus was dragged before King Herod just before He was murdered, Luke tells us that Herod was excited to meet him because he had been hoping to see Jesus do some sign [Luke 23.8].

Seemingly everybody who meets Jesus in the Gospels wants some sign, but when they get one they still don’t seem to be able to read those signs for what they mean. They’re pushing at a door that says, “Pull.” At one point, Jesus throws up his hands in exasperation and says in effect, *“You people look up in the sky, and you see some dark, cumulonimbus clouds gathering up, and you’re perceptive enough to say, ‘Uh, oh, it’s going to rain.’ And when you see evidence of the south wind blowing, signaling summer, you realize that hot weather is on the way, so you put on your shorts and T-shirts, and sure enough, the thermometer goes through the roof. You can interpret the signs of the sky. Why can’t you interpret what it means that I am here?”*

We are not too good at reading the signs; at least, not the signs that matter. That includes the disciples in today’s Gospel. The disciples are sitting opposite the massive megachurch, St.-Peter’s-Cathedral-sized,

Mall-of-America-looking Temple, gaping at the shining stones and dazzling jewels, perhaps thinking silently that this Temple building, this central pivot point of Judaism, is what connects them to God. Then Jesus, unimpressed, tells them, *“All of this is going to be nothing more than a pile of rubble.”* The disciples, shocked, ask, *“Teacher, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?”* They want to know when the Temple will be destroyed. They want a sign.

Maybe they’re expecting Jesus to tell them something kind of esoteric and mysterious, some hidden knowledge like, *“In the month of April, a blackbird with red eyes will land on the steeple and caw three times. It will then be eaten by a hawk wearing a purple sash and suddenly lightning will strike on the north portico and crop circles will appear in the cornfields and then you’ll know”* . . . or something like that.

You almost have to chuckle at Jesus’ very different answer, because it’s so obvious. The sign is not esoteric, hidden, or mysterious at all. Basically Jesus tells them, *“Well, when you see a great big old army camped around the Temple about to take it over, and they have really big weapons, well, that’s going to be the end of it. They’re going to tear it down.”* As comedian, Bill Engval, would say: *“Here’s your sign.”* And then Jesus says, *“And when you see a great big angry-looking army about to take over the city of Jerusalem, here’s my advice. Run. Do not be prideful or brave. Head for the hills.”*

There’s no mysterious sign here. It’s a very obvious sign. Even disciples who aren’t very good at reading signs, who are always pushing on doors that say “Pull” can get this one. It’s like Jesus says, *“Trust me, you’ll know when it’s happening. The sign will be obvious and right in front of you.”* Sure enough, around the year A.D. 70 (or C.E., “Common Era,” as it is now politically correct to say), a large Roman army did encamp around the Temple, and eventually they did raze it to the ground: not one stone left on another, every one of them thrown down. The sign Jesus gave could be trusted.

In the next breath, though, Jesus goes on to speak of other signs. Jesus moves from describing the signs of the destruction of the Temple to describing the signs that will be seen when He returns, when He comes again in final victory. Again, His message seems to be that signs of the final victory will be obvious. They won't be esoteric or mysterious or hidden. He says, ***“Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven.”***

It's as if Jesus is saying, *“In my first coming, I came in hiddenness, born in a manger, cloaked in flesh, visible only to the eyes of faith. But when I come again in fullness, it will be in power and glory.”* It will not be hidden. It will be obvious to all, like when you go to the eye doctor and he asks you to read the largest line of letters on the eye-chart first. The signs will be that clear to see. [Although, I have to confess that, before my cataract surgery, without my contacts, I could barely make out the largest “E” on the chart. I suspect that, spiritually, there are some who are just that myopic.] Again, the sign Jesus gives can be trusted.

Did any of you catch the lunar eclipse this past week? I went out about 5:00 AM, but everything was kinda hazy, so I wasn't overwhelmed by the experience. I don't know about you, but if tomorrow I were to see crazy stuff happening in the sun and moon and stars and then see the Son of Man surfing on a stratus cloud up at the sky, I won't need a prophet or an expert in the *parousia* to let me know that maybe something's going on.

Jesus makes the point that the signs of the Second Coming, the unveiling, the final victory, whatever it will look like, will be obvious when it arrives. We don't have to read the tea leaves or get out the Ouija board or read books on prophecy or look for signs of when it is near. In a sense, it is always near. And when it comes in its fullness, Jesus says, *“Trust me, you'll know.”* So we don't have to be like the little kid on the long car trip who keeps asking every ten minutes, *“Are we there yet?” “Are we almost there yet?”* When we get there, we'll know.

In the meantime, we can know that we are almost there, because the signs

that Jesus performed are signs that the Kingdom of God has already broken in among us. God's future has entered our present. It is at hand, as close as the hand at the end of your arm. At hand. The kingdom is coming. That train has left the station, and we can hear its far-off whistle. It's coming, and it's coming, Scripture tells us, "soon."

Soon could mean tomorrow, it could mean a thousand years from now, but soon means it's coming. Soon means we are one day closer to it today than we were yesterday. The kingdom is near, and it's coming with all its fullness soon. Until then, I can't help but think that Jesus is more interested in the signs to be seen here on earth, than the signs to be seen in the heavens — not signs in the sun and moon and stars, but signs in me and you and us.

We're not so much to be looking for signs; we are signs — signs of God's kingdom. We are the signs before the signs. We live the heavenly life here on earth, signs pointing to God's good future and final victory.

The theologian Karl Barth had a copy of a painting of the crucifixion on the wall of his study (you have a copy in your bulletin). Painted by the artist Matthias Grünewald, it is the centerpiece of what is known as the Eisenhelm Altarpiece. In the painting there is an image to the right of John the Baptist, his extra long finger raised way, directing and pointing the onlooker to the cross of Jesus in the center of the painting. It's said that when Barth would talk with a visitor about his own work, he would direct them to John the Baptist in the painting, and he would say, "*I want to be that finger.*" In other words, he wanted to be a sign pointing to the victory of Christ.

We are the people who have read the end of the book. We know how the story ends. We know God wins. So we, as God's people, live out our life of love together. It's not that we stand on a corner holding a sign that says "The End is Near." Rather we live in such a way that our life together is a sign reading "The New Beginning is Near."

We are the beachhead of the kingdom. We are like the preview or trailer

of the movie that makes people look forward to seeing the full show. We're like the warm-up act that gets people pumped up for the concert that is about to begin. We are the appetizer that makes people hunger for the full feast — like the lady at the ice cream shop who lets you get a little taste of the Chunky Monkey before she hands you the full cone.

People don't have to travel through time on a mysterious island or gaze into a crystal ball to look into the future. They can simply look at the lives of the faithful, loving Christian community. The sign Jesus gives can be trusted.

Driving down our street these past weeks has been a bit of adventure, since most of my neighbors have raked their leaves into position to be picked up by the city (I think we're last street on that list). Well, some of my neighbors have obviously not seen, or have chosen not to pay attention to, the guidelines; they have piled huge mounds of leaves in the road. Just's Fourth Law of Traffic Behavior states: *“On any roadway where two vehicles approach one another from opposite directions, their paths will cross precisely at that place where the roadway is restricted or obstructed.”* So getting home has taken just a tad longer, since I have to stop every fifty feet or so to let another car pass through.

But, I take those piles of leaves as a sign that winter is very near.

“Look at the fig tree and all the trees,” Jesus says in the verse that immediately follows today's Gospel. ***“As soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.”***

We are those leaves. We are signs of the change that is coming, of the beauty that is about to follow. We can shine forth brightly and be beautiful. We don't wait for the world to change, or for everything else to change its color. We just go ahead and be consistently changed by the Spirit of Christ. We can point others to what is coming and live the heavenly life now. We can be a sign of God's shalom.

This world will set up all kinds of signs for people, trying to telling them — and us — which way to go. Some tell people to push when the door really only opens with a pull. Most of those signs are stop signs. Most of them say that the road we are traveling on is a dead end. That is no way to go.

We, the Church, set up another sign in the world: “*Coming Soon.*” We are that sign. A soon sign. We are the sign Jesus gives, and He asks us to trust Him so that this sign can be trusted by any and all around us.

Amen.